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DEPT FOR SCA/A, PM/WRA, INL, AND INR

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/25/2017

TAGS: [ASEC](#) [KHDP](#) [MASS](#) [AF](#)

SUBJECT: TALIBAN SEIZE 17 DEMINERS AND 3 VEHICLES IN GHAZNI

REF: A. KABUL 1983

[1](#)B. KABUL 1745

Classified By: Acting Pol-Mil Counselor Chris Buck; Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (S/REL ISAF) Summary: Alleged Taliban fighters under Mullah Safiullah took 17 Afghan NGO deminers hostage on June 23 and seized 3 of their vehicles. This is the second attack on Afghan demining NGOs in as many weeks involving armed groups capturing vehicles. The Taliban kidnappers reportedly threatened to kill the hostages if Coalition and Afghan security forces continue military operations against them in the area. The kidnappers also reportedly stated that the deminers would be released pending completion of undefined "investigations." One of the demining NGOs had been receiving threatening messages from a caller demanding that the NGO provide funds to the Taliban. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) The Taliban seized 17 Afghan deminers along with 3 of their vehicles at 0540 on June 23, while the deminers were traveling from Ghazni City to their work site near Arzo village, Andar district, Ghazni province. A deminer and driver who evaded the kidnappers notified the Afghan police and reported seeing the armed kidnappers flee towards Deh-Yak district, Ghazni province. The police reportedly engaged the kidnappers but ended the hot pursuit when they ran out of ammunition. The deminers belonged to a mine clearance team jointly operated by the Mine Clearance Planning Agency (MCPA) and Mine Detection Dog Center (MDC), two Afghan demining NGOs partially funded by the U.S. Department of State. Both NGOs and the UN Mine Action Center Afghanistan (UNMACA) have notified local authorities with details regarding the hostages and vehicles in the hopes that they would not be accidentally targeted by any security forces in the area. An UNMACA source stated that the kidnappers appeared to be using the hostages to protect themselves from Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and Coalition forces as the latter had reportedly cut off all main roads providing exfiltration routes. This is the second attack on Afghan demining groups in as many weeks, both involving armed groups capturing vehicles (ref A).

[1](#)3. (SBU) A Taliban member known as Mullah Safiullah reportedly called Reuters on June 24 claiming responsibility and stating that the group was still deciding what to do with the kidnapped deminers, according to a Reuters wire report. MDC also received a call to its regional office from men claiming to be Taliban fighters led by Mullah Safiullah who demanded that the government and Coalition end all operations against them in the Hada Qalah Serani area of Deh-Yak district, the alleged location of the hostages and their Taliban captors. The Taliban claimed that the hostages have

been dispersed to separate sites. They added that further government and/or Coalition action would result in the hostages' deaths but that the deminers would be released after "further investigation." MCPA's director noted that the callers were using the kidnapped deminers' mobile phones.

¶4. (S/REL ISAF) While the kidnappers have not directly contacted the Kabul HQ of either NGO, MDC director Dr. Mohammed Shohab Hakimi told polmiloff that, since early June, an anonymous caller had frequently threatened to harm his organization if he did not provide "financial assistance" to the Taliban in the amount of USD 30,000-40,000. (Note: The caller claimed that the Taliban were suffering from financial hardship. End Note.) Though the caller identified himself as a man from Garam-Seh, Kandahar, Dr. Shohab reported that he sounded like a man from Logar or Maydan-Wardak province. He provided the telephone number from which he received the calls: 93 (0) 701-715-985. As of June 25, the kidnappers reportedly have not demanded money, instead suggesting a prisoner exchange, though their primary concern appears to be a halt to military operations in the area.

¶5. (S/REL ISAF) Dr. Shohab stated that MDC has sent a six-person delegation to visit the elders of Hada Qalah Serani to enlist their support in persuading the Taliban to release the hostages. He said the delegation also will contact former Taliban commanders to request their intercession on MDC's behalf. (Note: Afghan demining NGOs, including MDC, always maintained a neutral status throughout the conflicts that have ravaged Afghanistan and were able to continue operations under the Taliban regime. End Note.) Both MDC and MCPA have asked local authorities that they be allowed time to negotiate through local elders and their contacts before further military operations are executed in the area.

¶6. (SBU) The three seized vehicles were all white, 13-pax Land Cruisers, though one had been converted into an ambulance. License plate numbers for the vehicles follow: M-6441 (MCPA Land Cruiser), UN-1013 (MCPA Ambulance), and M-5196 (MDC Land Cruiser). VIN/Chassis numbers for the vehicles are, respectively, JTERB71J-500014084, JTERB71J-700014085, and GTERB71-30012916. Two Codan radios and five VHF radios along with demining and first aid equipment were also taken.

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